



## Exploring the relationship between land abandonment and landscape identity in traditional cultural landscapes: the case of Castelsaraceno, Italy

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### ABSTRACT

Traditional cultural landscapes are often valued for their multifunctionality and are increasingly being viewed as models for informing sustainable land management and landscape planning. However, land abandonment in Europe has contributed to the gradual decline and disappearance of traditional cultural landscapes. Although the impacts of land abandonment on traditional cultural landscapes have been widely examined from biophysical and socioeconomic perspectives, there is a knowledge gap in the study of the impacts from sociocultural ones. This paper contributes to filling this gap by exploring the relationship between land abandonment and landscape identity. To achieve this, we study the case of Castelsaraceno (Italy), a town which has historically boasted a rich agro-pastoral system and shepherding tradition, as an example of a region characterized by traditional cultural landscapes that has experienced sustained trends of land abandonment since the mid-20th century. Interviews were conducted with shepherds to understand their perceptions of land abandonment drivers, traditional land management practices, and social identity dynamics. Our findings highlight how land abandonment is perceived to have occurred predominantly through a lack of generational renewal, though underpinned by several other interacting factors which are both regionally- and site-specific, spanning to include economic conditions as well as rising social stigma and changing family dynamics. These land abandonment drivers have led to the decline of the traditional agro-pastoral practices in Castelsaraceno and to substantial changes in shepherds' landscape identity. These changes are represented through a higher sense of disaffection towards the landscape, as well as a general sense of value loss. Amongst growing interest in land abandonment as an opportunity for novel rural development paradigms, such as nature restoration and nature-based tourism, we argue that future research and policy development concerning landscape planning should more thoroughly take past landscape dynamics into account, human experiences, values, and legacy knowledge upon which traditional cultural landscapes have been founded and sustained. Accounting for these elements can help guide transformative change and inform more sustainable and culturally sensitive landscape management planning.

### 1. Introduction

Traditional cultural landscapes are often valued for their high degree of ecological, social, and economic multifunctionality (Angelstam et al., 2021; Cullotta and Barbera, 2011). Having developed through a historically continuous interaction and co-evolution of human and natural elements, traditional cultural landscapes are widely perceived to be well-balanced entities, exhibiting a legible and distinct character, and

holding valuable insights for the development of future land management pathways (Antrop, 2005; Dossche et al., 2016; Zerbe, 2022). However, trends of land use intensification and land abandonment experienced throughout Europe since the mid-20th century have contributed to the gradual decline and disappearance of traditional cultural landscapes (Barbera and Cullotta, 2016; Cusens et al., 2024; Dax et al., 2021; Lasanta et al., 2017; Quaranta et al., 2020).

Land abandonment is a complex and multifaceted process which

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involves various interacting biophysical, socioeconomic and political factors (Rey Benayas et al., 2007; Subedi et al., 2022). The advancement of land abandonment itself is influenced by both external and local drivers, which respectively determine its onset and the dynamics of its development (Lasanta et al., 2017; Quintas-Soriano et al., 2022). Political and institutional agendas have historically acted as external influences on land abandonment in Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe, agricultural abandonment has been shaped by the collapse of socialism, post-collectivisation processes, and the subsequent integration of some countries into the European Union. In Southern Europe, particularly in mountainous regions, industrialisation, urbanisation, and an increased exposure to global agricultural markets have played a stronger role in stimulating land abandonment (Farinella et al., 2017; Ustaoglu and Collier, 2018). EU policies, such as the subsidised set-aside of farmland, stricter sanitary regulations, and the decoupling of direct payments from products under the EU Common Agricultural Policy between 1992 and 2004, have further elevated the risk of farmland abandonment across both regions (Keenleyside and Tucker, 2010; Lefebvre et al., 2012; Pointereau et al., 2008). Whilst historical, institutional, and political contexts often trigger land abandonment, its scale and extent are shaped by local characteristics and conditions. Biophysical landscape traits such as slope, elevation, and soil quality can reduce the economic viability of agriculture and limit the feasibility of modernisation or mechanisation (Rey Benayas et al., 2007). Socio-economic conditions including agricultural plot size, land management practices, and market competitiveness, along with household dynamics and farmland succession, further influence how and where abandonment unfolds. Similarly, the future trajectories of abandoned agricultural lands, whether towards rewilding, afforestation, or alternative land uses, are closely tied to both broader and site-specific characteristics (Munroe et al., 2013). Nevertheless, forest and shrub encroachment represent some of the most frequent consequences of land abandonment, with the dominant post-abandonment trajectory in Europe being oriented towards the establishment of revegetated semi-natural landscapes (Fayet et al., 2022). Land abandonment may consequently lead to an overall homogenisation of the landscape, thus weakening its integrity and multifunctionality (García-Ruiz et al., 2020).

The relationship between land abandonment and the decline of traditional cultural landscapes has been largely understood from biophysical and socioeconomic perspectives (Subedi et al., 2022), with the consequences of land abandonment being a topic of ongoing debate. On one hand, arguments concern the potentially positive effects on environmental indicators such as soil health, carbon sequestration, and water quality (Roxo et al., 2023), and on the other, the potentially negative impacts on biodiversity (Sartorello et al., 2020), the proliferation of invasive species (Guillerme et al., 2020; Lenda et al., 2023; Stoate et al., 2009), and increased wildfire risk (Acha and Newing, 2015; Bergmeier et al., 2021; Regos et al., 2023). However, traditional cultural landscapes are often also closely tied to local communities' sense of place, heritage, and relationship with the natural world (Quintas-Soriano et al., 2023; Zscheischler et al., 2019). Land abandonment may manifest through the loss of characteristic traits such as traditional land management practices (e.g., crop rotation, organic fertilisation, and use of local animal races), anthropic rural elements (e.g., dry stone-walls, ponds, shelters, and enclosures), and non-material heritage features (e.g., toponyms, dialects, and music) (Cullotta and Barbera, 2011). The loss of these elements may not only contribute to an overall degradation of the social fabric upon which traditional cultural landscapes are founded (Barnaud and Couix, 2020; Wilson et al., 2017), but also to changes in the meanings and values people associate with nature. The reconfiguring of nature's values is central to the topic of land abandonment in traditional cultural landscapes, the latter acting as de-facto repositories of local ecological knowledge and embodied practices which have historically maintained biodiversity and sustained rural livelihoods (Ianni et al., 2015; Tattoni et al., 2017). Landscape change through abandonment can also be emotionally experienced by

people through solastalgia, a form of distress and loss of sense of belonging resulting from environmental change and consequent disconnection from the landscape (Whitaker, 2023). At the same time, the revegetation and re-naturalisation of traditional cultural landscapes has in some cases led to shifts from agriculture-based to tourism-based economies and the development of new landscape narratives and values (Quintas-Soriano et al., 2023; Tattoni et al., 2021).

Several frameworks, including cultural ecosystem services, bio-cultural diversity, and place identity (Assandri et al., 2018; Hanaček and Rodríguez-Labajos, 2018), have been adopted to examine these dynamics. However, the more complex relationships and interdependencies between changing land uses, local identities and sociocultural dynamics remain comparatively overlooked. The concept of landscape identity, understood as "*the perceived uniqueness of place*" (Stobbelaar and Pedroli, 2011), attempts to account for these interrelationships by encompassing several dimensions of social identity, landscape perspectives, and imaginaries. Because landscape identity embodies reciprocal influences and dynamic change between people and the landscape over time (Dossche et al., 2016; I. Ramos et al., 2019), it offers a particularly relevant perspective in the study of traditional cultural landscapes which have developed through centuries of transformations in human-nature interactions. Consequently, landscape identity represents a flexible and dynamic conceptual tool. However, landscape identity requires external inputs from different disciplines in order to be operationalised (I. L. Ramos et al., 2016; Stobbelaar and Pedroli, 2011). Traditional cultural landscapes are often shaped by traditional land management practices established over extended periods of time which are, in turn, tightly linked to the immaterial heritage, local ecological knowledge, and environmental values held by local communities.

This paper examines the traditional cultural landscape of Castelsaraceno, a town in Southern Italy which has experienced consistent trends of depopulation and land abandonment since the 1950s. Once the centre of transhumance movements within the region, the shepherding tradition and traditional land management practices which characterised the landscape of Castelsaraceno have gradually declined. This paper aims to better understand the relationship between land abandonment and shepherds' landscape identity. To do so, we ask the following research questions: 1) what do shepherds perceive to be the drivers of land abandonment?; 2) how do shepherds perceive traditional land management practices to have evolved over the last 30 years?; and 3) how has land abandonment shaped shepherds' landscape identity?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Conceptual framework

The landscape identity framework elaborated by Stobbelaar and Pedroli (2011) sets the basis for the conceptual framing of this case study. Stobbelaar and Pedroli (2011) deconstruct landscape identity by articulating two guiding axes to understand how human constructs and natural features interact: (1) *the spatial-existential* and (2) *the personal-cultural*. The spatial-existential axis is concerned with how human-environment interactions shape landscape identity. Here, the *existential* dimension expresses the sense of identity and belonging which individuals derive from a landscape, whilst the *spatial* dimension describes how people characterise and claim a landscape as their own by experiencing its physical features. Conversely, the personal-cultural axis distinguishes between individual and collective experiences of a landscape. Spatial-existential and personal-cultural axes interact to generate four separate dimensions: (1) the *personal-spatial*, which describes the role of characteristic landscape features (e.g., physical elements, visual aspects, sounds, smells) in modelling an individual's unique perception and experience of the landscape; (2) the *cultural-spatial*, which describes the role of characteristic landscape features in modelling shared perceptions and values of the landscape; (3) the *personal-existential*, which

describes landscape meanings and associations (e.g., memories, emotions, familiarity) contributing to a sense of individuality and personal sense of being; and (4) the *cultural-existential*, which describes collective landscape meanings and associations (e.g., symbolism, celebrations, customs) that contribute to creating a sense of togetherness and shared sense of belonging. Landscape identity can be understood through dynamics of action and perception, which is critical in accounting for how shifts in land use impact people's relationship with the landscape. Dossche et al. (2016) highlight these dynamics by exemplifying how profound shifts in land use due to land abandonment generate a mismatch between existential and spatial identities, meaning that local communities still attributed meanings and values to a landscape which no longer existed. Butler et al. (2018) similarly report a discontinuum in landscape identity following forest fires in Sweden, which resulted in communities experiencing an overall loss of recognition of the landscape as their own.

To better articulate the interface between the spatial-existential and personal-cultural axes of the landscape identity framework within the context of traditional cultural landscapes, we draw upon the documentation of traditional land management practices, and Jaspal and Breakwell's (2014) identity process theory (IPT) (Fig. 1).

Traditional land management practices, especially in Mediterranean areas such as Castelsaraceno, are commonly represented by crop and livestock rotation systems, organic fertilisation and the use of local animal races and crop varieties, amongst others. These practices also often determine the presence of rural features, amongst which dry-stone walls and enclosures, livestock shelters, ponds, terracing, hedgerows, and footpaths (Barbera and Cullotta, 2016; Cullotta and Barbera, 2011; Tino, 2016). Whilst traditional land management practices significantly characterise the physical aspect of landscape and peoples' perceptions of it, they are also key to understanding human-nature relationships, environmental values and local ecological knowledge. The latter relies on recurrent, place-based interactions with the environment, such as in traditional cultural landscapes. Local ecological knowledge may, for example, include the foraging of plant species for medicinal and culinary purposes, knowledge of seasonal ecological cycles, as well as fire management practices (Molnár et al., 2023). Traditional land management practices, as well as the local ecological knowledge which underpins them, are individually and collectively defined, generationally transmitted, and intimately linked to socio-cultural, emotional, and affective interpretations of the landscape. Consequently, traditional land management help not only to account for both personal-spatial and cultural-spatial landscape identity, but they also serve as a key entry point for understanding personal-existential and cultural-existential landscape identity dimensions.

In order to better understand the personal-existential and cultural-existential dimensions of landscape identity we draw upon identity process theory. IPT consists of four foundational principles. We define them here as applied to the concept of landscape: (1) *distinctiveness*, indicating the way that individuals find uniqueness from others stemming from their relationship with the landscape; (2) *continuity*, which refers to a sense of grounding and stability in relation to oneself and the landscape over time; (3) *self-esteem*, which describes how a landscape influences positive and negative conceptions of themselves; and (4) *self-efficacy*, which defines how a landscapes allows an individual to meet their demands and contributes to the creation of a sense of satisfaction and personal worth. IPT has been used extensively in the field of environmental psychology to understand people-place bonds and identity transformations in the context of socio-environmental change (Jones and Walker, 2023; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). Two major distinctions make IPT particularly relevant to the context of land abandonment and traditional cultural landscapes. Firstly, Jaspal & Breakwell (2014) highlight how IPT allows for the crucial distinction between individual and collective identities. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) highlight this difference through the study of forced relocation of a mining community in the UK, noting how the individually perceived

sense of distinctiveness and continuity was highly influenced by that of the broader community. Secondly, IPT emphasises the importance of the spatial dimension when considering people-place bonds. Jones and Walker (2023) offer a clear account of this by applying IPT to the case of landscape destruction following a forest fire and highlighting how ensuing dramatic landscape changes had profound psychological and identity repercussions on the local community.

The documentation of traditional management practices and IPT principles is particularly relevant in the context of traditional cultural landscapes, where people have a deep physical and emotional bond with the landscape. Both elements are, therefore, essential for understanding the relationship between land abandonment and landscape identity in a more nuanced manner.

## 2.2. Study area

Castelsaraceno is located in the predominantly mountainous and semi-arid region of Basilicata in Southern Italy (Fig. 2), falling into the ultra-peripheral category of the State catalogue of 'internal areas'<sup>1</sup> (ISTAT, 2022). As of January 2024, Castelsaraceno counts 1148 residents, a 43 % decrease from a population of 2020 inhabitants in 1990 (ISTAT, 2024). Similarly, the number of active farms in Castelsaraceno decreased from 658 to 111 between 1961 and 2010 (Quaranta and Salvia, 2014). Depopulation and land abandonment in Castelsaraceno have led to the decline of the agropastoral system which historically characterised the landscape, and to the loss of the shepherding tradition. The town and its surrounding landscape have historically acted as a centre of convergence for transhumant shepherds migrating from the South-Eastern lowlands to the South-Western highlands of the Apennine Mountain range. Whilst shepherding constituted a fundamental element of Castelsaraceno's economy until the mid-20th century, the community experienced substantial outmigration due to the emergence of more economically lucrative employment opportunities outside the region (Armenti and Iannella, 1995; Quaranta and Salvia, 2014). Consequently, the traditional agropastoral system and land management practices which the town's economy and culture had historically developed upon began to decline. This has led to the gradual encroachment of forests onto pastures and cropland, as well as to an overall homogenisation of the region's landscape (Quaranta et al., 2020). As of 2024, only two shepherds remain active in Castelsaraceno. Whilst environmental change advanced gradually until the late 1990s, sudden shifts in land use have reportedly taken place in the early 2000s. This has largely consisted of land abandonment, which has led to uncontrolled vegetation growth, shrub encroachment, and an increase in populations of wildlife species such as wild boar (Quaranta and Salvia, 2014). To address these changes, the municipality of Castelsaraceno has adapted by increasingly leveraging its natural resources to promote the development of a tourism-based economy, a vision facilitated by Castelsaraceno's strategic location between the Pollino National Park and the National Park of the Lucanian Apennines. In 2022, the municipality of Castelsaraceno launched its own tourism brand called "Visit Castelsaraceno", which focusses on promoting outdoor activities such as hiking, mountain biking, and climbing, as well as the territory's culinary heritage. The inauguration of the world's longest Tibetan bridge in 2021 has been central to Castelsaraceno's tourism programme (Visit Castelsaraceno, 2025). Whilst this record has since been overtaken as of 2025, the bridge still represents the main attraction in Castelsaraceno, having been advertised significantly as the bridge connecting two national parks and having received substantial media attention nationwide. The municipality of Castelsaraceno has also set out to value its shepherding heritage by instituting a Shepherding Museum in 2017, hosting a permanent collection of shepherding items and utensils (Museo della

<sup>1</sup> Ultra-peripheral = 75 min or more away (driving) from the nearest urban centre which offers healthcare, education, and public transport.

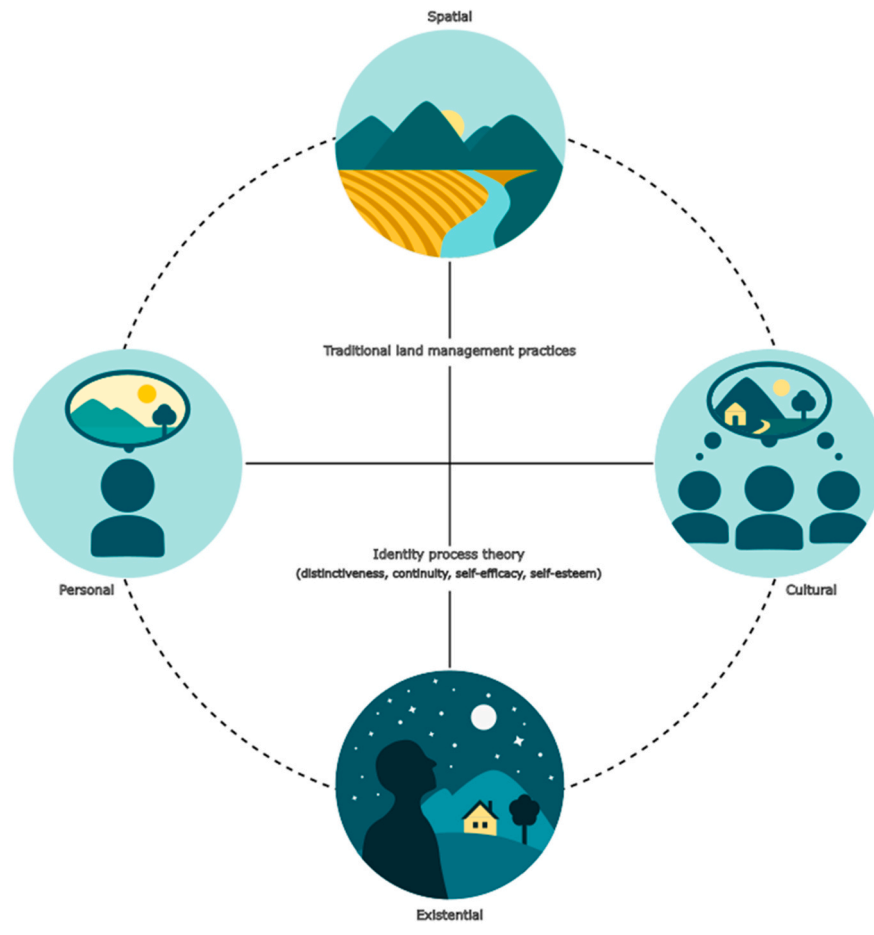


Fig. 1. Landscape identity framework adapted to traditional cultural landscapes.

Pastorizia Castelsaraceno, 2025). The museum also acted as a mediator between tourists and shepherds, offering visitors the opportunity to spend a day with the last shepherds of Castelsaraceno. However, this activity was later discontinued. Tourist accommodation businesses have increased in Castelsaraceno over the last decade, largely in the form of bed and breakfasts and rural homestays. Overall, the development of Castelsaraceno's tourism industry has been largely community-based and its development has marked a significant shift in the local economy. In 2023, Castelsaraceno obtained a prestigious national award and recognition for tourism quality (Touring Club Italiano, 2023). While this transition has represented an economic alternative for Castelsaraceno, the tourism sector's reliance upon seasonal tourist affluence represents a source of inconsistency and. Other economic activities in Castelsaraceno mainly consist of small businesses and enterprises including construction, healthcare, and hospitality.

### 2.3. Data collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based upon the conceptual framework (Appendix A). The objective of this study was to explore shepherds' perspectives in depth rather than aiming for a representative sample of the wider population. We interviewed only shepherds because of their function as repositories of local ecological knowledge and traditional management practices, and the role they play in shaping the landscape firsthand. Shepherds also have a more embodied experience of land abandonment. These elements are key to understanding traditional cultural landscapes. Castelsaraceno is running out of shepherds. Only two shepherds currently remain active, while the rest have either aged and/or retired from shepherding. The shepherding

tradition in Castelsaraceno is rapidly declining and that critical firsthand knowledge may soon become unavailable. The town's small size and close-knit community facilitated the identification of interviewees, and a local guide provided a detailed list of all active and retired shepherds. All shepherds in the lower age groups (30–49 and 50–65) were interviewed because they are in lower numbers. Shepherds above the age of 65 were interviewed until a thematic saturation point was reached, meaning that no new information was emerging from the interviews. A total of 17 individuals were interviewed, consisting of active and retired shepherds, as well as individuals who transitioned from shepherding to other occupations (Table 1). Due to the decline of shepherding in Castelsaraceno, most respondents in this study fall into the latter categories. Two active shepherds remaining in the territory of Castelsaraceno were interviewed, with the addition of two transhumant cattle herders who were located in the lowlands ('marine') at the time of the data collection. Cattle herders were interviewed because they were also once shepherds. Interviews were conducted in Italian, lasted approximately 1h, and were conducted in Castelsaraceno between February and May 2022.

Most interviews occurred in convivial and familiar settings, where multiple family members would often be present. Data collection through scheduled and set interviews were compounded by participant observation. This occurred daily in bars, cars, mountains, fields, barns, and through brief exchanges in the town square. Visits were made to a retired shepherd's garage, where traditional farmers' sticks were crafted. Mountain walks with local residents, including youths and hunters, provided insights into their relationship with the landscape, drawing from personal stories and knowledge of the land. Valuable observations were made during several days spent with one of the last shepherds in Castelsaraceno, during which several aspects of a typical day, including

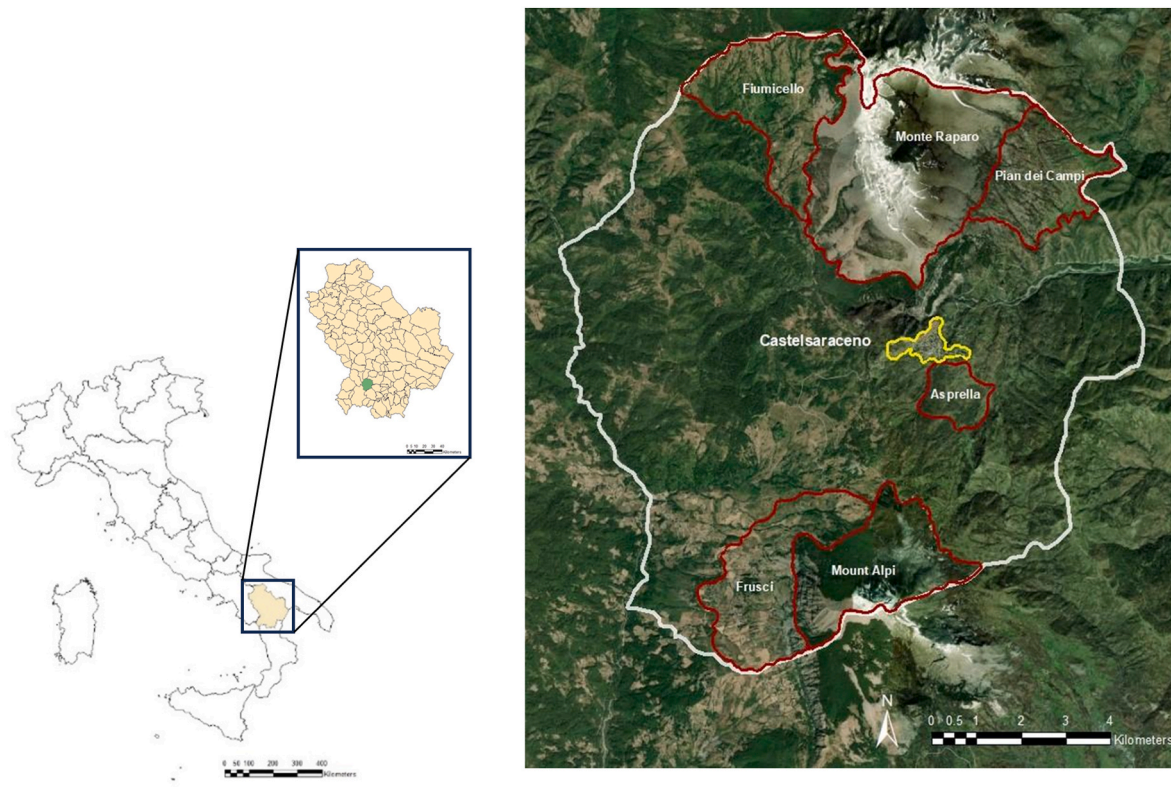


Fig. 2. Study area located in Basilicata.

**Table 1**  
Demographic data of respondents.

Category	Sub-categories	Participants n (=17)
<b>Age group</b>	30–49	3
	50–65	6
	>65	8
<b>Gender</b>	M	15
	F	2
<b>Status (in shepherding)</b>	Active	4
	Inactive/Transitioned	7
	Retired	6
<b>Operation type</b>	Sheep and goats	15
	Cows	2

grazing, milking, and cheese-making, were closely observed. Participation in community events, such as bonfires and Easter celebrations, also formed a part of the participant observation approach. Some participants were met regularly for a morning coffee, during which brief notions of their experience and opinions on various topics would often be shared. Participant observation contributed to an appreciation for the broader environment and the influence of different elements on the research topic, ultimately helping to better interpret the data.

Interviews were often facilitated by mediators who would physically accompany the researcher to interview locations as well as assist in the interview process. Language initially proved to be challenging due to the local dialect “Casteddano” being the preferred mode of communication. Familiarising with the dialect was essential in understanding rurality and rural practices in Castelsaraceno due to certain concepts not having a correspondent or not being known by study participants in the Italian language.

#### 2.4. Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and literally transcribed. In order to

maintain anonymity, respondents were coded as S (shepherd) followed by the number of the interviewee. A thematic content analysis approach was adopted to analyse the interview data, with the interpretative identification of main themes and codes (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Interviews were coded following an iterative process which followed both a deductive method with pre-defined code categories, such as in the case of traditional management practices, as well as inductive coding method which allowed the data to speak for itself, such as in the case of landscape identity and values. Three main themes were identified: ‘drivers of land abandonment’, ‘traditional agricultural practices’, and ‘landscape identity’. Land abandonment drivers were coded based upon a review of the literature, identifying the following sub-codes: ‘generational renewal’, ‘lack of interest in-shepherding and hardship’, ‘economic conditions’, ‘changing family dynamics’, ‘bureaucratic constraints’, ‘failed modernisation’, and ‘social stigma’ (Lasanta et al., 2017; Subedi et al., 2022; Terres et al., 2015). The following codes were assigned to the ‘traditional agricultural practices’ theme based upon traditional cultural landscape indicators (Cullotta and Barbera, 2011; Solymosi, 2011) and a catalogue of agropastoral practices common in the South of Italy (Tino, 2016): ‘A Curtaglia’ (manuring technique), ‘fallows’, ‘crop rotation’, ‘forest grazing and management’, ‘water management’, ‘field and pasture management’, and ‘organic manuring’. The ‘landscape identity theme’ was initially coded on the basis of the landscape identity dimensions: ‘personal-spatial’, ‘cultural-spatial’, ‘personal-existential’, ‘cultural-existential’. These were then sub-coded based upon the identity principles pertaining to identity process theory: ‘distinctiveness’, ‘continuity’, ‘self-esteem’, and ‘self-efficacy’.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Socio-cultural and political-economic drivers of land abandonment

Lack of generational renewal is perceived to be the overarching socio-cultural cause of land abandonment in Castelsaraceno, articulated

by respondents as the product of several sub-drivers, including (1) a lack of interest in shepherding due to the hardships of the profession, (2) poor economic conditions, (3) changes in family dynamics and roles, (4) complications in shepherding caused by bureaucracy and agricultural policy, (5) a lack of agricultural and infrastructural modernisation, and (6) social stigma surrounding the figure of the shepherd (Fig. 3).

Socio-cultural drivers of land abandonment span to include social stigma, changes in family dynamics, and a progressive lack of interest in the shepherding profession linked to its hardships and challenges. Despite its decline, shepherding is still widely regarded as an integral aspect of Castelsaraceno’s heritage and character and often attributed to the town’s very foundation by shepherds. However, the public perception of shepherds has not always held a positive image. This shift is cited as contributing to the failure of generational renewal and the decline of shepherding in Castelsaraceno, with social stigma negatively affecting the attractiveness of the shepherding profession. A shepherd who turned baker describes how the shepherd’s image has progressively transitioned from one of affluence and respect to one associated with poverty and ignorance.

*“Shepherds were once admired in Castelsaraceno ... shepherds brought money, they gave life to the town, also with the construction of houses! When the shepherds came back from the ‘marine’ of Ferrandina, Craco and Pisticci, rich people who invested in the town came back. The shepherds built their houses, they gave life to the town ... and after that there was sort of a degradation of the figure of the shepherd [...]” (S.5)*

Some shepherds integrate the narrative of social stigma by recounting instances in which younger generations, whose parents owned livestock, found themselves marginalised due to their lineage being perceived as unsophisticated and ill-mannered. These accounts highlight the importance of family engagement in shepherding, a theme frequently mentioned by respondents. A retired shepherd offers his personal family story as an example of what he thinks occurred on a larger scale throughout the community.

*“The sheep reached their end because young people didn’t want to be with them anymore [...]. My father had six children: three women and three men. We were all working with those damn sheep! [...] Once upon a time, if the father stopped (working), the son stayed on. Nowadays, if the father pulls out, so does the son.” (S.4)*

The father-to-son handing over of the shepherding profession is emblematic of a traditional patriarchal system which has also faded. Shepherding is perceived to only have been possible through the full engagement of the family and the assignment of distinct roles. While men were responsible for tending to livestock, women played a pivotal role in the production, distribution, and sale of products. A retired couple of shepherds, describe these dynamics whilst emphasising the hardship of their work.

*“Nobody wants to do this job nowadays! You needed a husband and wife! We did it, but we (women) used to sell ricotta and cheese, women used to go everywhere! And then nothing ... Neither men nor women (wanted to do it), now they (young people) just want to eat everything, lamb, meat, and cheese ... And now it’s over (shepherding) because they don’t want to do it, because they don’t want to do anything ...” (S.17)*

Women were, indeed, tasked with selling the family produce and distributing it door by door every day, often walking great distances to do so. In a picturesque remark, S.12 recalls his wife knitting socks and balancing a basket of cheese and ricotta over her head while walking to a nearby town to sell their products. The idea of reliance upon the nuclear family, however, is not a die-hard concept. One of the last two active shepherds in Castelsaraceno, describes how the absence of family members who to rely upon has influenced his work life.

*“I never did transhumance because I never got married ...” (S.14)*

As can be drawn from the previous words, there is a condescending attitude towards the aspirations of younger generations amongst retired shepherds. While this may be interpreted as a sense of pride for the challenges they themselves endured, these adversities often also served as a reason to guide their children to search for opportunities beyond Castelsaraceno.

*“... nobody wanted to do that job anymore. I told my children: look, I don’t want to see you having this ugly life that I did, this transhumance, this pastoralism, I don’t want to see you do it, go to school. And I really did send them to school! “... it was a hard thing to be transhumant” (S.3)*

Multiple interviewees emphasise the commitment required in shepherding, a profession that allowed little leisure time and consistently exposed shepherds to the elements. One shepherd compounds the challenges of shepherding through the idea that there was an unwillingness to modernise the profession.

*“The way I have always seen it is that a modern change could have happened ... but it did not happen here, we are 50 years behind. If you work as a shepherd the way that people used to work 50 years ago, with nets and things ... you don’t do it, you don’t move forward. If people had changed according to the times, I think all of this abandonment would not have happened.” (S.5)*

The decision to abandon shepherding, however, cannot be exclusively ascribed to physical and psychological hardships, or to the reluctance to engage in a profession perceived as unsophisticated. Beyond the socio-cultural sphere, political-economic drivers of land abandonment including market fluctuation, agricultural policy, and the bar-raising on production standards also played a substantial role in discouraging shepherds from continuing their work. One shepherd describes how, beyond the reluctance of people to continue shepherding due to social stigma, modernisation was hindered by bureaucracy and the introduction of harsher laws on agricultural production standards.

*“Over the years we have been constrained by certain things: products can no longer be sold as they used to be, because the law doesn’t allow it. Today if you go door to door to sell cheese it’s not allowed, so you had to remodel yourself on everything, which was not an easy thing for us because you were going to spend the winter in places where you couldn’t even find the comforts for people” (S.6)*

These changes are not only credited with limiting production but also affecting economic conditions. Many shepherds highlight how prices fell dramatically, and consequently led to the decline of shepherding

*“[...] there is no market nowadays. How can you sell a lamb for €3/kg?! What can you buy (with that money)?! I have sort of a passion, a stupid passion that worked me to death without being profitable. If I had to base my income on animals, I wouldn’t even be able to buy myself salt!” (S.1)*

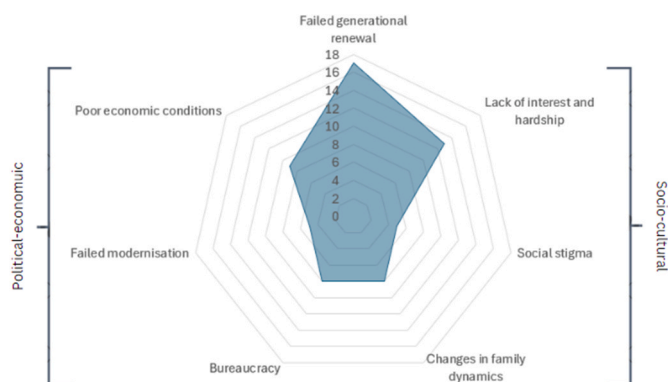


Fig. 3. Frequency of land abandonment drivers mentioned by respondents.

Shepherds frequently emphasise the demanding nature of their work and the inadequate compensation they received, to the point where it hindered their access to basic necessities. They often depict a clear contrast between the economic hardships faced towards the end of their career and the passion that drove them to continue until it was no longer economically viable. Indeed, ceasing their activity was seldom a wilful choice. S.15, one of the last active shepherds in Castelsaraceno, sheds light on what motivates him to persevere in his line of work.

*“(I continue herding sheep) because of passion, if not to get by a little bit. This job isn’t feasible anymore because there are too many requirements. Production is not like it used to be and there are no more sales. We can’t buy what we need to feed the animals because it’s too expensive.” (S.15)*

### 3.2. Traditional land management practices

Currently abandoned practices identified by shepherds include (1) field and pasture management, (2) crop rotations, (3) water management, (4) forest management, (5) fallowing, (6) the manuring practice of ‘A Curtaglia, and (7) organic manuring (Fig. 4).

#### 3.2.1. Crop rotations, ‘a curtaglia, organic manuring, fallows, and water management

Shepherds’ livelihoods relied not only upon livestock rearing, but also involved small-scale farming. Most shepherds either owned or rented parcels of land which served to grow fodder for their animals as well as food for their families.

*“It was common to also grow a bit of wheat and oats on pastureland. A good 80 % of shepherds used to do this kind of job. There was a rotation [...]” (S.10)*

Wheat was particularly important, being not only the predominant food crop produced in Castelsaraceno and of great economic value, but also of cultural significance. Several wheat varieties used to be sown in Castelsaraceno, each one bearing a distinct body of knowledge regarding its use and growth requirements. Shepherds identified six distinct wheat varieties.<sup>2</sup> The Senatore Cappelli variety was consistently credited with yielding high-quality flour and, through its dialect name ‘U Cappello’, often referred to as a variety which has been cultivated in Castelsaraceno for generations. One shepherd describes the importance

of wheat, recalling different varieties and the diligent approach taken in experimenting with different wheat varieties.

*“When it was sowing season, you would plant a certain variety of wheat. This (parcel of) land needs ‘U cappello? Then you plant ‘U cappello! If the land was good you could plant any kind of wheat. If the land was poor you couldn’t plant ‘U Cappello. And you would change types of wheat accordingly, for example instead of ‘A Ianguledda you would plant the Rossia variety. Bread was better with ‘A Ianguledda, it was harder with Rossia. With ‘U Cappello it was even harder, but the bread was the best!” (S.4)*

Wheat production was also part of a more complex agro-pastoral farming system where livestock, food crops and fodder were cultivated in rotation.

*“Once upon a time we would plant (crops) on the land as well as keep animals. And the land was sown for one year, and not (sown) the following. And you would sow in rotation. You would plant potatoes, wheat, la Saragodda, ‘O graneddo, all these durum wheat varieties, whilst ‘A ianguledda and Carusedda were soft wheats. The piece of land that we sowed one year, was left to rest the next year and the other was sowed in rotation, in order for the wheat and the land itself to become stronger. Because if you keep sowing the land it gets tired, it won’t produce ...” (S.3)*

Rotations of several food crops and fallows were established to maintain the productivity of the land. However, livestock rearing had an even more influential role in how the land and sowing seasons were managed. This occurred not only through direct grazing, but also through the cultivation of fodder, such as oats, barley and alfalfa.

*“When wheat was sown, it wasn’t sown all year on the same land. One year you would plant wheat and the following you would plant wheat on another piece of land, and it would be grazed on by sheep. If one year you planted wheat, the next you would plant oats and barley” (S.4)*

Some shepherds, who maintain that fodder did not always require sowing, explaining that land which had been previously harvested for wheat would naturally yield high-quality grasses. One of them explains how this occurs as a consequence of wheat residues being left on the ground and maintaining soil quality.

*“Fodder was also partly sown on the land [...] if one year you had wheat and crop residues, the grasses were good even without them being sown! Because these grasses were from a land that had been previously sown, not 10 years before but the previous year. It was good grass for making hay, because it was from a land that had been cultivated.” (S.6)*

The absence of practices related to both cropping and livestock rearing is perceived to have had negative consequences. A shepherd who shifted from sheep to cattle herding, sees a decline in the quality of grasses, attributing its decline to the disappearance of the agricultural practices previously practised in Castelsaraceno.

*“The quality of grass has gotten worse; it has become wilder. Once upon a time there was cultivated land, there were crop rotations, now only useless grasses grow” ... “Once upon a time the majority of land was cultivated, and then, when the land freed up because it was harvested, it all became pastureland. There was sort of a rotation, one year you would sow one parcel and the next you would sow another” (S.1)*

Cropping depended on livestock for fertilisation, and widely took place through ‘A Curtaglia’. Widely documented in the South of Italy and known as ‘stabbatura’ in Italian (Tino, 2016), this practice consisted of enclosing a flock of sheep onto a parcel of land. This would be repeated over several nights until the entirety of the targeted parcel had been manured.

*“There was a net, a net made of twine, that’s what it was made of. You would make an enclosure with twine and wooden poles, and you would*



Fig. 4. Frequency of abandoned traditional management practices mentioned by respondents.

<sup>2</sup> Wheat varieties with local name, and Italian name in brackets: ‘U Cappello (Senatore Cappelli), ‘An Ianguledda (Biancolella o bianchella), Rossia, ‘A Saragodda (Saragolla), Carusedda (Carosella), Graneddo.

*stay 2 or 3 nights in one place. Then you would move to the next: another enclosure always with the same net, until you had covered the whole parcel of land, whether it was 2 ha or 3. And then you would sow the wheat for the following year” (S.12)*

*“You would do ‘A Curtaglia’ when the weather was good, because you would have to spend the night under the stars” (S.13)*

Shepherds were also required to maintain the water sources necessary for themselves as well as their livestock. This would typically consist in the maintenance of freshwater springs as well as water troughs and field drainage systems. Whilst drainage canals on the land took the form of simple trenches, artificial waterways built to conduct water from springs into drinking troughs were often made in stone, tiles and tree bark. Shepherds also maintained a common water trough and animal refuge on the top of Mount Raparo.

*“They (the shepherds) needed water courses and so water was managed, they channelled (water) in the fields and for their livestock to drink. It was the shepherds that did this work, they built wooden structures to make the water flow. I also did these things. The water would be channelled to take it into the fields, this was also needed for the pasture, for the quality of the pasture!” (S.10)*

*“Shepherding is finished and there’s not a single active water fountain left. The shepherd looked after the spring. With an ancient kind of tile, they cleaned the spring that was needed for himself and the sheep.” (S.9)*

### 3.2.2. Forest and field management

In Castelsaraceno, forests and shrubland were once integral components of the agricultural landscape, serving the needs of both livestock and the local population. Forested areas and pastures were connected, with human management of forest growth regulating their expansion. Shepherds particularly emphasise the importance of wild fruits such as plums, chestnuts, and acorns, which used to provide enrichment for both human and animal diets.

*“In Castelsaraceno there used to be a clear part of pasture and then a part of forest. The sheep used to cross one clear part, go into a forested one and then into another clear one. It’s not like we used to take them there (purposely), it was all part of the pasture!” (S.11)*

*“I take the sheep to the forest so they can eat acorns. There are also other grasses in the forest: ivy, the ‘faloppa’, the coppuedda, a variety of tufts of grass. The forest grasses are more sour but they’re part of the whole.” (S.14)*

Most shepherds stress how the presence of shepherds limited the growth of shrubs and trees, explaining how both crop farming and shepherding contributed to limiting vegetation growth. Some describe the changes between the past and present, citing a loss of value in the land due to the overgrowth of brambles and brooms.

*“[...] the lands used to be cultivated, so there weren’t any brambles. And then there were many animals, they didn’t even let the smallest bramble grow. They (the sheep) always cleared (the land), [...] there weren’t any (brambles) once upon a time, then the land was abandoned and any kind of bramble was born from it, all types. And they’re no good in the land, the land isn’t worth anything anymore, it has no value.” (S.4)*

Some shepherds recount how their sheep used to consume the red berries of brambles and the white flowers of brooms, which helped control the growth of these shrubs. Other interviewees delve deeper into this theme, elaborating on how a transition towards cattle herding led to increased shrub growth on the land. The connection between shrubs and the local shepherds and farmers is also evident in the folklore of the region. An anecdote narrates how two shepherds once met, with one warning the other about the presence of ‘thieves’ on his land, a reference to the encroaching brambles and brooms. Additionally, certain annual festivities rely on the presence of shrubs throughout the landscape. For

instance, during the celebration of San Giuseppe, the youth of Castelsaraceno venture into the countryside to gather brooms, which are then stacked in the main square and set ablaze in honour of San Giuseppe.

The devaluation of the land can be associated with a phenomenon of natural reclamation in Castelsaraceno and the diminishing human cultural landscape. In other interviews, respondents elaborate on how even if there were a desire to reclaim the land, the productivity would not be the same due to the reduced quality of grasses and the intrusion of wild animals. This recurring theme is evident in all interviews, with wild boars arousing both frustration and apprehension.

*“The landscape has changed from A to Z – once upon a time there was cultivated land, now there’s only wild boars!” (S.8)*

### 3.3. Landscape identity

This section addresses the four dimensions of landscape identity (personal-spatial, cultural-spatial, personal-existential, and cultural-existential), compounding them with social identity principles drawn from IPT. The personal-existential is most representatively portrayed by participants through their intimate connection with shepherding, and most notably through the notion that the profession runs through their veins. This sentiment, coupled by the portrayal of shepherding as a matter of family heritage, is frequently articulated in connection to the abrupt interruption of their activity.

*“... sheep are in my blood!” (S.6)*

*“It wasn’t nice (to abandon shepherding) because it’s a job that we grew up with. We grew up with animals, we have it in our blood! But if you can’t keep doing it you can’t keep doing it ...” (S.7)*

The inability to answer a natural call to shepherding is often viewed as a failure to meet one’s ancestral duties. These feelings may be interpreted as contributing to a loss of *continuity* and *distinctiveness*, and as reminiscence of a sense of self which has weakened. In other words, these statements reflect the loss of a sense of grounding and stability in relation to oneself and the landscape. A shepherd, who is currently employed as a woodcutter, portrays this metaphorically through the wheel of generational renewal which he was forced to interrupt. He carries on by explaining how a feeling of alienation and abandonment ensued.

*“[...] there have been seven generations of shepherds (in my family). The wheel turned and turned until I stopped it, and now it doesn’t turn anymore. [...] I felt lost, abandoned by everyone. [...] from the moment that I sold my animals I never looked back. For me (shepherding) doesn’t exist anymore. [...] if I had to do it, I would do it happily, but I would be back to square one ...” (S.16)*

Through the lens of [Jaspal and Breakwell’s \(2014\)](#) principle of self-efficacy, his experience may also be interpreted as a loss of an element of identity which previously granted him satisfaction and fulfilment. Whilst one shepherd stresses the fact that he can never return to shepherding due to both his older age and the decision to eliminate pastoralism from his life for his own mental wellbeing, another finds fulfilment in carrying on the pastoralism tradition as an accomplishment of his ancestral duties as well as a gift to the town of Castelsaraceno. Fatefully, he goes on to acknowledge that the tradition that he is continuing will end with him.

*“Inside of me I think that at least there is still another shepherd left, just to maintain the tradition of our ancestors. This is how I try to give something to Castelsaraceno. With me and S.14, the pastoralist tradition ends” (S.15)*

Emotional attachment to shepherding and a sense of loss due to its abandonment also find their expression through changes in physical

elements of the landscape and the material heritage produced through the latter. These changes reflect the personal-spatial dimension of landscape identity, where a causal relationship is often established between land and culture and articulated through a strong attachment between people and the natural environment of Castelsaraceno. S.6 expresses attachment to Castelsaraceno and a sense of distinctiveness which he draws from the gastronomical tradition and the environmental features of the landscape.

*“I’m attached to Castelsaraceno for many reasons: for nature, for the mountains, the clean air, for the traditions that have been handed down to us, for the food. These are increasingly missing nowadays, also because the land has all been abandoned, because everything comes from the land!” (S.6)*

When speaking about nature and mountains, Mount Raparo is frequently mentioned. Regarded as an important landmark for shepherds, it has been designated for centuries as communal grazing land and represents a workplace as well as a space for contemplation. Several shepherds describe a feeling of control and awareness of their place in the world when being on top of Mount Raparo due to its elevation and isolation from society. With the decline of shepherding and land abandonment, however, the way in which people engage with the landscape has considerably changed both directly and indirectly. The landscape of Castelsaraceno is valued by many for activities such as mushroom picking and the gathering of firewood, consequently representing a source of personal enjoyment and fulfilment. However, shepherds explain how the decline of grazing practices has affected access to the landscape. S.9 explains how paths which were once maintained by shepherds and their flocks are now almost impenetrable, having now succumbed to overgrowths of brambles and brooms.

*“There’s an ugly aspect: because of the abandonment of fields, of agriculture and ovine-caprine zootechnics, you find that the paths used for mushroom picking are overgrown. Once upon a time, shepherds passed through, and goats browsed the paths” (S.9)*

Perceptions and experiences of the landscape are dual, being split between the more solitary experience of nature presented previously, and the longing for a now extinct collective sharing of the environment. This duality articulates the cultural-existential dimension of landscape identity. Although many interviewees report the benefits of experiencing nature individually, such as tranquillity, serenity and fresh air, the absence of a collective experience of the landscape is widely spoken about with nostalgia. S10 remembers the Castelsaraceno’s countryside as a place of congregation and social exchange:

*“(In the countryside) you were with other people, you had conversations with other people, everyone was close, you helped each other. It was sort of a barter; you would help each other - also between shepherds and farmers! There was more harmony. As a child I experienced the landscape more, [...] you felt more involved when you were in the countryside. It gave you something more, compared to now. I had this sensation of feeling accomplished ...” (S.10)*

Moreover, a larger human presence across the landscape is consistently reported as granting a sense of social security. Iummicceddu, once a thriving locality known as the ‘granary’ of Castelsaraceno, is now abandoned. Many shepherds recall how the road linking Iummicceddu to Castelsaraceno, a route used daily by people who worked in the countryside, was populated even during the nighttime. Overall, many interviewees describe a feeling of unease and vulnerability when being in the landscape on their own. Whilst these feelings can one hand be attributed to the encroaching overgrowth and the presence of wild boars, they also stem from a lack of trust in the community’s knowledge of the terrain on the other. These sentiments also fuel a loss of continuity which emerges from the inability to continue a way of life due to the decline of a collective environment. Ultimately, these perspectives underline profound change in the cultural-spatial dimensions of landscape

identity, where the community’s relationship with the landscape and between its people has changed due to physical changes in the environment.

*“If you feel ill when you’re in the countryside, you need time to call, time for them to come find you, because they also need to know where to come, you need a competent person because not everyone knows where places are ...” (S.8)*

*“Your heart cries ... remembering how it was when I was a child and seeing all this abandonment. Your heart cries. I experienced the countryside when it was full, full of people. Just think that there were 500 people that walked from Castelsaraceno to Iummicceddu every day, you weren’t even scared in the night because there were people ...” (S.5)*

#### 4. Discussion

Rural abandonment and the decline of shepherding in Castelsaraceno have led to significant changes in land use and landscape character. Our findings suggest that the abandonment of shepherding has contributed to Castelsaraceno’s transition from a traditional cultural landscape to a semi-natural landscape, reflecting the dominant post-abandonment trend occurring throughout Europe (Fayet et al., 2022). Land abandonment is identified by shepherds as being predominantly a consequence of a lack of generational renewal, though intertwined with several other factors which reflect the social, cultural, economic, and political driver categories identified by Rey Benayas et al. (2007) and Subedi et al. (2022). More importantly, they fit the Mediterranean- and shepherding-specific drivers of land abandonment illustrated by Farinella et al. (2017) who blend the failure of generational renewal with several other sub-drivers including increasing demands on production standards, unfavourable market prices, lack of modernisation, and harsh working conditions. Whilst regional overlap is significant, site-specific drivers of land abandonment should also be considered. In Castelsaraceno such drivers are represented by the fluctuating social stigma concerning the figure of the shepherd, which transitioned from being significantly degraded over the years only to be later recuperated as an object of esteem by both local and regional entities (Regione Basilicata, 2021). This trend is reflected to some extent through the establishment of the local shepherding museum in 2017, though remaining shepherds are largely disconnected from its set-up and activities.

Understanding land abandonment drivers and structural landscape changes requires shepherding in Castelsaraceno to be examined within the scope of a complex agro-pastoral system which has been largely discontinued. These systems featured crop-pasture rotations, use of crop residues, forest management, manuring systems, and the maintenance of agricultural infrastructure such as dry-stone walls, water drainage systems, and shepherd huts. The degradation and disappearance of these elements, which reflect the traditional cultural landscape indicators identified by Cullotta and Barbera (2011), has not only altered the physical appearance of the landscape but has also influenced how shepherds interact and identify with their surroundings. Perceptions of physical landscape changes are most evident in aesthetic preferences, with a managed and ‘tidy’ landscape being the most favoured. Shepherds commonly expressed a diminished landscape value largely because of reduced human activity and an environment perceived as wild and disorderly, echoing perceptions of untidiness, uselessness, ugliness, and stress generation described by Ruskule et al. (2013) and Thanasis, (2014). However, despite not currently embodying shepherds’ ideal landscape, Castelsaraceno continues to evoke positive emotions, memories, and associations of a past landscape. The discrepancy between and negative and positive perceptions, as also observed by Dosche et al. (2016), suggests a significant mismatch between the evolutionary trajectories of spatial and existential landscape identities following land abandonment. Whilst on one hand, the physical experience and use of the environment has changed almost entirely (spatial),

the now intangible features of the past landscape linger on through associations and memories (*existential*). In Castelsaraceno, however, this dichotomy is compounded by considerable variance within the dimensions themselves, with land abandonment and loss of landscape value weighing significantly on *personal-existential* landscape identity. Feelings of sadness, anger, and grief are commonly associated with land abandonment and the decline of shepherding, embodying a loss of continuity, self-efficacy, and sense of accomplishment linked to the interruption of shepherding. These observations echo those of [Riechers et al. \(2020\)](#) who document profound landscape changes driven by industrialisation as stimulating a disconnection with ancestors as well as future generations through the loss of knowledge and cultural transfer. In Castelsaraceno, this disconnection from the landscape is compounded by a loss of social distinctiveness, due to shepherds' traditionally privileged status within the community. Changes in personal values and relationships with the landscape are reflected at the collective level. Our findings highlight how Castelsaraceno has experienced a profound shift in poles of social cohesion, with the preferred place of convergence having moved from the countryside to the town centre. Described as once providing a sense of community, exchange, and belonging, the countryside has now become dehumanised and barren in the eyes of many respondents. These shifts mirror observations made by [Murin et al. \(2022\)](#) on the deterritorialisation of community identity stemming from depopulation and a reduction of activity in the landscape.

The evolutionary trajectories of spatial and existential landscape identity can also be broken down through the lenses of gender and intergenerational differences. The younger generation of shepherds (ages 30 to 49) physically engages with the landscape in a significantly different way compared to the older generation (over 65 years of age). Currently, remaining shepherds cover smaller grazing areas, have never practiced transhumance or engaged in small-scale farming, rarely make use of traditional land management practices, and have in some cases shifted from sheep to cattle herding. Younger shepherds also lack the direct experience of Castelsaraceno's landscape as a collective living environment, both because of their family's disengagement from shepherding as well as the lack of neighbours whom to rely upon for social interaction and mutual aid. The younger generation of shepherds consequently exhibits a different spatial landscape identity compared to the older generation. These differences are reflected to a lesser degree amongst shepherds belonging to the middle age group (ages 50–65). Typically representing the last in their lineage, this generation of shepherds witnessed the peak of the decline of the shepherding tradition and were often those who took the decision to interrupt their activity. Many still remember Castelsaraceno as a well-defined and socially constructed agricultural landscape through direct experience during their youth. However, this generation of shepherds had mostly already abandoned traditional land management practices by the time they inherited the family business and no longer relied upon family participation in shepherding. Although spatial landscape identity differs across generations of shepherds, the preservation and intergenerational transmission of landscape values and associations means that existential landscape identity has transformed at a comparatively slower pace. Whilst not directly experiencing the landscape of their ancestors, the last two active shepherds nonetheless act as repositories of shepherding knowledge and represent important cultural reference points for the local community. Interviewees often recognise a more authentic version of shepherding in the older generation because of their engagement in small-scale farming, transhumance, and use of traditional land management practices. Furthermore, the reliance on family participation and the gendered division of labour which is frequently mentioned by interviewees is mostly characteristic of the shepherding activities of the older generation. No women in the younger and middle age categories were interviewed because there are none in Castelsaraceno. The absence of women shepherds in these age groups and the fact that shepherding in Castelsaraceno embodies a traditionally patriarchal tradition which is transmitted through male family members, justifies the assumption by

which women are unlikely to have been significantly involved in shepherding during the last 30 years. Although shepherding has historically been a highly masculinised activity, this trend is likely to have increased over time. The desire of older generations of shepherds to send their children to school and avoid the hardships of shepherding has likely played an important role in supporting this trend. Referencing Spanish agro-pastoral systems and land abandonment, [Camarero and Sampedro \(2008\)](#) point out how the patriarchal structure of these systems typically implied that women were often sent off to school by their parents while the male 'heir' to the family business remained. More importantly, young women also left the family business as a form of emancipation and social mobility. Similar accounts of these dynamics are provided by [Fernández-Giménez et al. \(2022\)](#) who describe women pastoralists encouraging their children to pursue higher education. Whilst we may consider the landscape identity of the older generation of women shepherds to be consistent with that of men, this cannot be said about younger generations because they likely did not engage in the activity.

Ultimately, the past landscape of Castelsaraceno is viewed with nostalgia by many respondents and as a source of tradition, culture, and wellbeing. This nostalgic vision of the landscape is often compounded by a sense of resignation towards the future emerging from the perceived impossibility that the complex social dynamics which the agro-pastoral system that Castelsaraceno thrived upon can be revived. Similar accounts of shepherds' lack of hope for positive change are also documented by [Dossche et al. \(2016\)](#), who argue that the knowledge of the past landscape and shepherds' attachment to it convey a sense of security, and consequently reluctance to hold a positive outlook. Most shepherds would like to see Castelsaraceno return to its past state, a vision which is hampered by the lack of generational renewal. However, whilst landscapes of the past may not be revived, some elements and practices may find new purposes in a changed landscape ([Antrop, 2005](#)). Despite the diminishing role of shepherds in the landscape and their attitude of resignation towards the future, the land management practices which characterised the past landscape of Castelsaraceno are the result of a long process of adaptation of people to their environment. As such, traditional land management practices and their remnants represent an unrecognised body of knowledge which is crucial to informing future land planning, land restoration initiatives, and policy ([Zerbe, 2022](#)). Critically, land is not only being abandoned but is also being increasingly viewed as an opportunity for alternative uses including nature-based tourism, rewilding, carbon sequestration, and biofuel production ([Crawford et al., 2022](#); [Navarro and Pereira, 2015](#); [Sallustio et al., 2022](#); [Subedi et al., 2022](#)). These novel rural development paradigms and landscape imaginaries, which are most emblematically embodied in the newly adopted EU Nature Restoration Law, often re-envision human roles throughout the landscape from being extensive to being considerably limited. In Castelsaraceno, for example, the recent shift towards a nature-based tourism sector has been guided through the promotion of the ideas of uncontaminated nature and wilderness. This newly adopted trajectory, however, appears to conflict with what shepherds identify with or regard as valuable. Whilst tourism in Castelsaraceno has recognised the shepherding tradition's role as being foundational to the landscape's identity and has contributed to a re-found sense of pride for the town's shepherding past ([Museo della Pastorizia Castelsaraceno, 2025](#)), the last two active shepherds themselves remain on the fringe of the tourism enterprise. Their limited participation in creating the new landscape's meaning suggests that the expansion of tourism has not significantly influenced shepherds' landscape identities. However, the wider community's involvement in tourism-related activities is increasing. Nevertheless, Castelsaraceno's population continues to decline steeply, and the most traditionally agricultural and pastoral areas remain abandoned. Furthermore, the absence of shepherds has led to an overgrowth of vegetation which has impeded access to areas where the community engages in activities such as walking, mushroom picking and foraging.

Understanding landscape identities and perceptions of land

abandonment in traditional cultural landscapes can help guide transformative change and inform more sustainable and culturally sensitive landscape management planning. In exploring the dynamics of traditional cultural landscapes, particularly in areas like Castelsaraceno, it is important to not only consider the traditional roles of shepherds but also the novel emerging identities and values associated with these landscapes. Whilst this study focuses on shepherds, insights from younger generations and non-shepherds can help understand potential pathways for the shaping of new collective identities. As areas such as Castelsaraceno transition towards nature-based tourism, novel landscape identities are being increasingly influenced by ideas of a 'wild' and 'natural' landscape. Indeed, as we explore the shifting landscape of rural communities, it becomes apparent that landscape identities and imaginaries are also being reshaped. Although landscapes and identities are inherently dynamic, it is also important to question who truly 'owns' these new landscape imaginaries and who benefits from them. Whilst nature-based tourism may on one hand be economically advantageous for areas like Castelsaraceno, it may on the other exacerbate the trend of disconnection of people from the landscape (Wilson et al., 2017). The driving forces behind these changes are often external actors, whose interests reflect urban needs and tourism demands. Consequently, the reimagining of traditional cultural landscapes can result in a form of 'external use,' where these are reshaped by entities which are external to the community itself. Although these developments may stimulate economic opportunities, they may also pose challenges to the sustainability of land management and landscape planning. One such challenge is the potential loss of shepherd legacy knowledge which may hold a critical role in navigating future landscape and land use changes. As traditional cultural landscapes evolve and the narratives and trajectories of communities affected by land abandonment are continuously reshaped, it is important to recognise the complexities of identities, imaginaries, and landscape ownership.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between land abandonment and landscape identity. To achieve this, we conducted interviews with shepherds in Castelsaraceno (Italy), documenting the perceived drivers of land abandonment, past and current traditional land management practices, and the impacts of land abandonment on social identity. Firstly, our findings suggest that land abandonment is perceived to have been primarily driven by a lack of generational renewal, though entangled with several other sub-drivers including social stigma, changes in family dynamics, bureaucracy, a lack of modernisation, and poor economic conditions. These findings highlight the diversity of land abandonment drivers, their impact, and the need for more localised understandings of land use change dynamics. Secondly, we find that the land abandonment drivers identified in this study have contributed to a widespread discontinuation of the traditional agro-pastoral system which previously characterised the landscape. Although these practices are unlikely to be revived within their previous socio-cultural context, they are the product of a historical interaction between humans and nature. Thus, they may hold key insights for maintaining the multifunctionality of traditional cultural landscapes and future landscape planning. This may be of particular relevance within the context of growing interest in abandoned areas for other rural development trajectories based on nature restoration and the development of nature-based tourism. Thirdly, our findings highlight how land abandonment has been paralleled by significant shifts in landscape identity. Shepherds' spatial landscape identity has considerably changed because of the loss of features both directly and indirectly linked to shepherding such as rural elements, landmarks, and access to the landscape for other recreational uses such as mushroom picking. The existential landscape identity of shepherds has, on the other hand, evolved at a slower pace due to the memory of the past landscapes and its contributions to human wellbeing being still vivid in the minds of

many respondents. However, the inability to actually obtain immaterial benefits such as satisfaction, happiness, and a sense of community from the landscape itself suggests that land abandonment has also significantly impacted existential landscape identity. Ultimately, shepherds articulate a 'loss of landscape value', where land abandonment has left shepherds feeling disconnected from their environment, and longing for a landscape which has disappeared. We find that novel landscape trajectories in Castelsaraceno, which are based upon nature-based tourism, are substantially divergent from shepherds' landscape identities.

We recommend future research and policy to address the broader spectrum of land abandonment drivers given its contribution towards a more holistic understanding of the functioning of past landscapes, a more critical analysis of potential future implications of land management, and the development of informed and sustainable landscape planning. In the study of traditional cultural landscapes, we recommend this attention to drivers of land abandonment to be compounded by a consideration of traditional land management practices which are foundational to their functioning and maintenance. Finally, we encourage future research and policy development concerning the transition of abandoned land towards other uses to consider how landscape and local communities' wellbeing are intimately linked, and how changing identities, landscape imaginaries, and values should be more closely accounted for in rural development programmes and landscape planning.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Kyle Jewell:** Supervision, Writing – original draft, Data curation, Visualization, Investigation, Methodology, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Project administration. **Bárbara Soriano:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Visualization, Conceptualization. **Luuk Fleskens:** Supervision, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **Giovanni Quaranta:** Resources, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Rosanna Salvia:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Resources. **Ana Iglesias:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Visualization.

## Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2025.103802>.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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